McKenna to 'rededicate' self to climate fight; Minister says 'there are other ways to tackle climate change'

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Body

Catherine McKenna, one of the highest-profile ministers in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government, announced Monday she won't seek re-election, citing a desire to spend more time with her children and to rededicate herself to the fight against climate change.

Over her six years in electoral politics, McKenna played a central role in the government's effort to rein in greenhouse gas emissions, first as environment and climate change minister in Trudeau's first cabinet, and then, following the 2019 election, as infrastructure minister.

She was only days into her first cabinet job when she took a seat at talks in Paris with other countries to negotiate a global commitment to keep the rise in global temperatures down and achieve net zero emissions in the 21st century.

"We then fought long and hard to protect it from Donald Trump," she said of the former U.S. president who pulled the U.S. out of the pact.

"And we fought longer and harder to live up to our commitments right here in Canada."

Those commitments included a national price on carbon, a fight that saw her become the target of vicious abuse on social media, often from right-wing partisans infuriated by the Liberals' climate change plans.

She called these incidents "noise" on Monday, and deemed the attacks unsuccessful.

"People want you to stop doing what you're doing. They want you to back down. And guess what? We didn't back down on a price on pollution, we doubled down," she said.

But, the issue would set up a fight with the provinces that would ultimately cost the Liberals a majority government in 2019 when they were wiped out in Alberta and Saskatchewan over fury about the carbon tax.

Political progressives, too, found fault with her efforts on the climate file.

The Liberals' insistence that they could fight climate change while at the same time supporting the ongoing development of the oil and gas sector, including the eventual purchase of the Trans Mountain pipeline, didn't fly with many climate change activists.

"I think that disconnect has become all the more apparent in recent years, particularly in the last year, given the pandemic and the leaps and bounds that we've seen in multilateral fora calling out the fact that countries are not

going to meet their climate commitments if they keep building fossil fuel projects," said Catherine Abreu, executive director of Climate Action Network Canada.

McKenna was put in charge of the infrastructure portfolio after the Liberals were reduced to a minority in 2019, instructed by Trudeau to keep the ball moving on another signature government commitment - a 12-year $188-billion infrastructure program.

The auditor general this year concluded the program wasn't moving as fast as billed, and how the money was being spent wasn't being tracked efficiently.

When asked Monday why the federal government had so much trouble with the program, McKenna said 3,500 projects worth over $10 billion had been approved and the federal government was at the mercy of provinces and territories to pitch ideas.

There's more infrastructure spending to come via the Liberals' 2021 budget, a wide-ranging plan that also included significant sums for green-related infrastructure programs such as a $200 million natural infrastructure fund designed to help shore up the country's parks, green spaces and waterfronts.

"I hope whenever there's an election, that Canadians understand that these investments are really important, and we can keep on doing it," she said.

Asked Monday whether her departure sends a signal that achieving progress on the environment requires being outside government, not within, McKenna rejected the idea.

"One hundred per cent no," she said, adding later: "I just told you the truth. I want to spend more time with my kids. And there are other ways to tackle climate change."

While McKenna has said she won't run again in her riding of Ottawa Centre, she said Monday that unless Trudeau shuffles his cabinet, she'll remain as a minister until the next election.

In a post to social media, Trudeau thanked McKenna for her work.

"At the cabinet table and across Canada, @CathMcKenna works tirelessly to tackle climate change, to protect our environment, to strengthen our communities, and to inspire women and girls. Catherine, your work will have a positive impact for generations to come," he wrote.

With an election expected within months, if not weeks, McKenna's decision to bow out immediately raised speculation that Mark Carney, the former Bank of Canada governor who is the UN special envoy on climate change, would now have a safe Ottawa-area seat to run in for the Liberals should he want to enter politics.

McKenna said she has long encouraged him to make the leap.

"The economy and climate are critically important, and they're actually intertwined," she said.

"So, he has a lot to add, but that's really a decision for him to make with his family."

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